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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effectiveness of two factors in second language vocabulary teaching: (1) presence or absence of a text; and (2) use of a variety of explanation types. The study's context was three 9th grade and one 10th grade class of English-as-a-Second-Language students in Hong Kong. All classes were taught by different teachers. Their classroom techniques for vocabulary instruction were videotaped and identified as nonverbal (use of objects, use of blackboard drawings, use of pictures, demonstrations, use of gestures) or verbal (use of synonyms, paraphrasing, exemplification, dictionary definition, use of affixes and word roots, first-language explanation, solicitation of first-language explanation from students). Each of the four classes was then given a different treatment for instruction of 10 vocabulary items: use of a text and multi-type explanations; text and single type of explanation; multi-type explanations without use of a text; and single explanation type without text. Comparison of pretest and posttest performance suggests that use of text is effective in helping learners abstract word meaning, but it was not clear whether single or multiple explanation types were more effective. (MSE)

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THE VARIETY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF STRATEGIES EMPLOYED IN VOCABULARY EXPLANATIONS IN EFL CLASSROOMS IN HONG KONG

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THE VARIETY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF STRATEGIES EMPLOYED IN VOCABULARY EXPLANATIONS IN EFL CLASSROOMS IN HONG KONG

Annie Lee On-lai

Introduction

This study examines the effectiveness of two factors in vocabulary teaching: firstly, the presence or absence of a text and secondly the use of a variety of explanation types (hereafter referred to as multi-type explanations) or a single explanation type (hereafter referred to as mono-type explanations).

Vocabulary teaching is one aspect of language teaching that has not been given the attention it deserves until recently. Wilkins (1972:111) emphasizes the need for vocabulary teaching. He maintains that '(W)ithout grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.' Yet without a deeper understanding of how vocabulary is taught in the classroom and which methods of teaching are more effective for learners, the teaching of vocabulary may not achieve the desired effects in the classroom where maximum teacher input and assistance are available.

A number of studies (e.g. Nation 1982, 1983, Carter 1985, 1987, and see also Bird, this volume) has been conducted on vocabulary acquisition. Nation and Coady (1988) suggest that 'context' for vocabulary learning can be viewed as both context within a text and the reader's background knowledge of the subject matter of a given text. In discussing the effect of context on vocabulary learning, they comment that 'studies on learning words from context have not shown the large amounts of learning we might expect, considering the rates at which first-language learners seem to increase their vocabulary.' (ibid.:103)

Nation (1990:1-2) further states that 'many teachers too quickly dismiss the approach of getting learners to study lists of words out of context', which can be a very effective way of acquiring vocabulary within a short period of time. On the other hand, Carter and McCarthy (1988:109) make the following observation about the importance of context in vocabulary learning, '(T)he general conclusion to be drawn from research is that learning vocabulary through context must be the major way of increasing vocabulary knowledge.' How far context (context within a text and background knowledge of the reader) may assist vocabulary explanation in the classroom thus forms one of the two factors to be examined in this study.

To define word meaning, Nation (1990) recommends four types of definition: definition by demonstration, by abstraction, through context and by translation. While each of these types of definition can be adopted to explain vocabulary items, Nation asserts that it is best to combine two or more types of definition. The second

factor examined in this study, therefore, is whether a single or a variety of explanation types better assist learners to abstract word meaning.

Despite the extensive research into vocabulary acquisition, classroom research on vocabulary explanation has not been widely conducted. This research therefore aims to investigate how and to what extent the two factors mentioned above affect vocabulary learning in the classroom. Statistical data and classroom discourse data will be examined.

Identification of Vocabulary Teaching Strategies

Before investigating the effectiveness of the two factors in vocabulary explanation, vocabulary teaching strategies in EFL classrooms were identified. Three S3 (Grade 9) and one S4 (Grade 10) reading comprehension classes from two different schools taught by four different teachers were observed and video-taped. All four teachers had more than five years of EFL experience, and two of them had majored in English in their university studies. The strategies used by these teachers were then classified according to Nation's (1990) vocabulary definitions with modifications made by the researcher. They are listed as follows:

A. Non-verbal

1. Using objects

Teachers bring into the class real objects or point to real objects within viewing distance of students.

2. Using blackboard drawings

Teachers use blackboard drawings for objects that cannot be brought into the classroom to illustrate what they are or what they look like.

3. Using pictures

Most course books are richly illustrated with pictures and these provide a useful and direct source of explanation. Teachers may also bring into the class pictures to illustrate meanings of words.

4. Demonstrations

Most action words and many situations can be more clearly explained by demonstration in class. For example, in explaining the word "rickshaw", the teacher got a student to demonstrate how a rickshaw is pulled.

5. Using gestures

a. Paralinguistic gestures help to convey meaning but are not essential to the explanation of word meaning.

b. Non-paralinguistic gestures may be essential to the explanation of word meaning since, without them, the meaning may not be effectively communicated, e.g. in explaining the word "terrified", the teacher used gesture to convey that she was terrified.

B. Verbal

1. Using synonyms

Although no two English words share exactly the same meaning, sometimes words can be explained by synonyms to illustrate one dimension of the meaning. For example, "rapidly" was explained by a teacher as "quickly".

2. Paraphrasing

When no synonyms can conveniently replace the meaning of the word, the meaning is explained in one or more phrases/ clauses.

3. Exemplifications

Teachers provide examples in the hope that students can deduce the meaning of the vocabulary item from the example.

4. Dictionary definitions

These are like paraphrases of word meaning but exact details are provided.

5. Using affixes / word-roots

Teachers use affixes and word-roots to help students get the basic meaning of a vocabulary item from which the exact word meaning is developed.

6. L1 Explanation

a. Teachers offer explanations in Cantonese (no such example was obtained from all the transcribed lessons).

b. Teachers solicit L1 explanation

If teachers expect students to know the word before or after an explanation is given, they may solicit a Cantonese explanation from the students as confirmation.

Design of the Study

An experiment was then designed to observe the effectiveness of multi-type and mono-type explanations with and without a text to establish how much, if any, these factors affect vocabulary learning in class. The 2 factors studied were manipulated so that the 4 groups were each given a different treatment as follows:

Group 1 Subjects were given a text and multi-type explanations of 10 target vocabulary items selected from a text.

Group 2 Subjects were given the same text and mono-type explanations of the same vocabulary items.

Group 3 Subjects were given multi-type explanations of the same 10 target vocabulary items out of context, that is, without a text.

Group 4 Subjects were given mono-type explanations of the same vocabulary items out of context, that is, without a text.

Two upper stream S3 (Grade 9) classes from a band 4 - 5 girls' school in the Hong Kong district were divided into four groups of subjects for the experiment. (Band 1 is the top of academic banding and Band 5 the bottom.) These groups, of 20 - 22 students each, were taught by the same teacher to control the teacher variable that might affect class input and thus learning outcome. The teacher, an English major university graduate with fifteen years of EFL experience, had not taught any of the subjects before. Thus her ways of teaching, if foreign to the subjects, were foreign to all subjects. While the teachers of the four classes video-taped (from which vocabulary teaching strategies were identified) were not conscious of the objectives of the study; the teacher conducting the experiment, being the researcher herself, was consciously aware of the study objectives as well as the importance of manipulating the four types of treatment.

The experiment adopted a pre-test -> treatment -> post-test design. Before effecting different treatments to the different groups, all groups were given a pre-test to establish the fact that the majority of the ten target vocabulary items (qualifications, approach, thoroughly, initiative, ambitions, pamphlets, vacancy, hunt, prospects, confident) were not previously known. This pre-test required the subjects to explain 19 vocabulary items (ten of which were the target items) in English and/or Chinese so that pre-treatment identification of the target vocabulary was avoided.

After the pre-test, each group was given a different treatment as mentioned above. Fifteen minutes after each treatment, the subjects were given 3 post-tests. Post-test 1 was a replication of the pre-test while post-test 2 was a summary cloze based on the given text and required subjects to fill in the blanks with the target vocabulary items out of a pool of 20 given words. Post-test 3, made up of 10 isolated sentences, required subjects to fill in the blanks with the same target vocabulary items out of the same word pool.

After the treatment and post-test sessions, 3 students from each group, selected at random, were invited for a video-taping and interview session to provide feedback on their learning during the treatment lessons and what they perceive were clear and effective vocabulary explanations.

Analysis of Findings

A comparison of the performance of the four groups in the pre-test and post-tests indicates whether teaching the subjects with or without a text using either multi-type or mono-type explanations has led to significant differences in vocabulary learning. Since the pre-test and post-test 1 were essentially the same test, a comparison of the results of the two tests illustrates the effects of each treatment as far as meaning recall of the target vocabulary items was concerned. Post-test 2, being a summary cloze of the text given to groups 1 and 2 but not groups 3 and 4, tested only how groups 1 and 2 applied the target vocabulary items to a familiar context (the context in which the vocabulary items were learnt). To groups 3 and 4 (the groups not given a text), post-test 2 was a test of vocabulary application to an unfamiliar context. Post-test 3, being a test of vocabulary application to contexts different from that of the text, was written in contexts unfamiliar to all four groups.

Table 1 illustrates the performance of the four groups of subjects in the pre-test and post-tests regarding the 10 target vocabulary items.

Presence or Absence of a Text

Since post-test 2 was not a familiar context to all four groups, only the results of the four groups in post-test 1 and post-test 3 could be compared and studied. Taking these post-tests to correspond to two dependent variables, a multivariate analysis of variance was performed (see Tables 2 and 6). An overall comparison of the scores of groups 1 and 2 (groups with text) and those of groups 3 and 4 (groups without text) indicates that the presence of a text does have a significantly positive effect on test results, as illustrated by Table 2.

Table 1

Overall Performance of the 4 Groups in the 10 Target Vocabulary Items

	n=20				n=21				n=21				n=22			
Vocabulary	Group 1 multi, + text				Group 2 mono, + text				Group 3 multi, - text				Group 4 mono, - text			
	Pr	Po1	Po2	Po3	Pr	Po1	Po2	Po3	Pr	Po1	Po2	Po3	Pr	Po1	Po2	Po3
qualifications	1	8	0	9	0	12	1	11	0	17	2	8	0	7	2	0
approach	0	8	9	5	1	11	11	5	0	6	2	4	0	1	0	0
thoroughly	0	9	5	3	0	14	4	2	0	1	3	0	0	3	1	1
initiative	0	1	0	0	0	9	1	4	0	1	0	0	0	4	1	0
ambitions	0	5	3	1	0	9	0	1	0	10	2	1	0	1	2	1
pamphlets	2	12	11	13	0	19	15	14	0	5	1	4	0	7	0	5
vacancy	0	14	4	7	1	9	4	7	0	1	0	3	0	1	1	2
hunt	7	15	14	3	9	14	8	0	12	16	0	0	3	9	1	1
prospects	0	7	5	2	0	6	3	1	0	6	2	0	0	1	2	3
confident	4	15	11	6	5	19	4	2	0	14	3	3	0	8	3	2
Total	14	94	62	47	16	122	49	43	12	77	14	23	3	42	12	15

Pr = pre-test, Po1 = post-test 1, po2 = post-test 2, po3 = post-test 3

Table 2 shows that the null hypothesis for factor 1 (the presence or absence of a text) is rejected, indicating that the text factor does have a significant effect on the performance of the subjects. Table 3, which shows the score differences across the ten vocabulary items, better illustrates the actual performance of the subjects on individual items.

Table 2

Multivariate Analysis of Variance for

the Hypothesis of no Overall Factor 1 (presence or absence of a text) Effect

Statistic	Value	F	Num DF	Den DF	Pr > F
Wilks' Lambda	0.525	17.399	4	77	0.0001
Phillai's Trace	0.475	17.399	4	77	0.0001
Hotelling-Lawley Trace	0.904	17.399	4	77	0.0001
Roy's Greatest Root	0.904	17.399	4	77	0.0001

Table 3

Score Differences of Groups 1 and 2 (with text) Versus Groups 3 and 4

(without text) in Post-test 1 and Post-test 3

Target Vocabulary	Grps 1 & 2 Results vs Grps 3 & 4 Results in Post-test 1	Grps 1 & 2 Results vs Grps 3 & 4 Results in Post-test 3
qualifications	-	+
approach	+	+
thoroughly	+	+
initiative	+	0
ambitions	-	0
pamphlets	+	+
vacancy	+	+
hunt	-	+
prospects	+	0
confident	+	+

+: Groups 1 and 2 obtained higher scores than groups 3 and 4
-: Groups 1 and 2 obtained lower scores than groups 3 and 4
0: No score difference between groups 1 & 2 and groups 3 & 4

In both post-tests 1 and 3, groups 1 and 2 performed better than groups 3 and 4 on seven out of the ten target vocabulary items. While groups 1 and 2 obtained lower scores than groups 3 and 4 in three vocabulary items in post-test 1, they obtained the same scores as the two latter groups in three items in post-test 3. As groups 1 and 2 were given multi-type and mono-type explanations with a text and groups 3 and 4 were given the same explanations without a text, the use of a text does significantly affect the learning outcome of vocabulary explanations. The text not only provides a first-hand context of vocabulary items through which vocabulary meaning can be guessed, but also serves as a concrete example of how these items are used and collocated with other words.

The findings are further supported by student comments in the post-experiment interview sessions. The majority of subjects from groups 3 and 4 (without text) stated that they could learn vocabulary more effectively with a text because they could guess the meaning of the words as well as examine how the words were used in relation to other words. Subjects in group 4 maintained that the presence of a text was essential, and that without one, vocabulary explanation must be made with examples so that word meaning could be clearly comprehended. Otherwise, they added, they often felt that the meaning of one word was very similar to the meaning of another word and only L1 explanation could help them to distinguish one from the other. The positive effect of using a text in vocabulary explanations is thus further reinforced.

Among the three target vocabulary items for which groups 1 and 2 obtained lower scores than groups 3 and 4 in post-test 1, two of them, 'qualification' and 'hunt' can be explained when interviews with students and the other types of scores for the four groups were examined.

Although very few subjects (in fact only 1) among the 84 subjects got the meaning of 'qualifications' correct in the pre-test, a significant number of them got it correct in post-tests 1 and 3. When subjects were interviewed, they said that they were able to remember the meaning of the word because once they heard the pronunciation of the word, they immediately recognised it to be the same word as the Cantonese transliteration of the word, "quali", which was often used in Cantonese conversations. In other words, before the teacher's explanation, they in fact knew the word by sound but not by form. The fact that they could remember the meaning of the word has to do with the matching of the sound to the form of the word rather than to do with the teacher's explanation.

As for 'hunt', the seemingly higher scores of groups 3 and 4 in post-test 1 have to be considered with the scores of the four groups in the pre-test. The score differences of the four groups between the pre-test and post-test 1 are as follows:

Table 4

Scores Differences Between Pre-test and Post-test 1 Regarding 'Hunt'

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Scores Differences	8	5	4	6

When the differences of the scores are considered instead of the raw scores of post-test 1, groups 1 and 2 performed slightly better than groups 3 and 4. Hence, even with a comparatively more familiar item such as 'hunt', the use of a text better helped students abstract the meaning of the word.

Use of Multi-type or Mono-type Explanations

A comparison of the scores between groups 1 and 2 (the multi- type and mono-type groups with text) as well as between groups 3 and 4 (the multi-type and mono-type groups without text) shows whether multi-type explanations, as recommended by Nation (1990), work better than mono-type explanations. Table 5 summarizes the overall effect of this second factor studied in the experiment.

Table 5

Multivariate Analysis of Variance for the Hypothesis of no Overall Factor 2 (use of multi-type or mono-type explanations) Effect

Statistic	Value	F	Num DF	Den DF	Pr > F
Wilks' Lambda	0.935	1.334	4	77	0.2649
Pillai's Trace	0.0648	1.334	4	77	0.2649
Hotelling-Lawley Trace	0.0693	1.334	4	77	0.2649
Roy's Greatest Root	0.0693	1.334	4	77	0.2649

The null hypothesis for the second factor has not been rejected, indicating that the use of multi-type or mono-type explanations in this instance has no significantly different effect on the subjects' scores. The following table compares whether the scores obtained by the multi-type groups are higher or lower than the mono-type groups.

Table 6a

Score Differences Between Group 1 and Group 2 in Post-tests 1 - 3

Vocabulary Items	Post-test 1	Post-test 2	Post-test 3
qualifications	-	-	-
approach	-	-	-
thoroughly	-	+	+
initiative	-	-	0
ambitions	-	+	0
pamphlets	-	-	-
vacancy	+	0	0
hunt	+	+	+
prospects	+	+	-
confident	-	+	+

-: Group 1 (the multi-type group) obtained lower scores than group 2 (the mono-type group)
+: group 1 (the multi-type group) obtained higher scores than group 1 (the mono-type group)
0: Group 1 (the multi-type group) and group 2 (the mono-type group) obtained equal scores

The score differences do not indicate that the multi-type groups (with and without text) necessarily obtain higher scores than the mono-type groups. In other words, multi-type explanations, whether given with or without a text, do not necessarily lead to better learning outcomes than mono-type explanations.

A careful study of the discourse data shows that the clarity and lucidity of vocabulary explanation, whether multi-type or mono-type, can be affected by a number of other factors. These are: (1) the level of learner involvement, (2) the repetition of vocabulary items, (3) elaboration of vocabulary explanations, (4) the level of abstraction of the vocabulary item and (5) the presence or absence of L1 equivalents.

Table 6b

Score Differences Between Groups 3 and 4 in Post-test 1 and 3

Vocabulary Items	Post-test 1	Post-test 3
qualifications	+	+
approach	+	+
thoroughly	-	-
initiative	-	0
ambitions	+	0
pamphlets	-	-
vacancy	0	-
hunt	+	-
prospects	+	-
confident	+	+

-: Group 3 (the multi-type group) obtained lower scores than group 4 (the mono-type group)
+: Group 3 (the multi-type group) obtained higher scores than group 4 (the mono-type group)
0: Group 3 (the multi-type group) and group 4 (the mono-type group) obtained equal scores

The Level of Learner Involvement

Since it has been established that the use of text has a significantly positive influence over vocabulary teaching and thus learning, results of the non-text groups are free from the effects of text use. The overall results of the three post-tests show

that group 3 performed better than group 4. This could be due to two possible reasons. Firstly, the richer variety of explanations could have made meaning abstraction easier for group 3. Secondly, the vocabulary explanations of group 3, which make higher cognitive demands on subjects by involving them in producing examples or by involving them in processing word meaning through examples, better help them grasp word meaning. Two extracts of the discourse data taken from groups 3 and 4 in the explanation of 'ambitions' help illustrate this:

Discourse data - Experiment Group 3

G117 Ms. Lee: Alright? Er, another word. (writes on board)
G118 Ambitions.
G119 Ss : Ambitions.
G120 Ms. Lee: Ambitions.
G121 Ss : Ambitions.
G122 Ms. Lee: Now, ambitions are things you want to be or
G123 you want to do. Well, like for example, when
G124 I was a small girl, my ambition was to be,
G125 what? No, not a teacher, was to be an animal
G126 doctor, OK? Have you got any ambitions?
G127 (to a student) What is your ambition?
G128 S1 : Nurse.
G129 Ms. Lee: You want to be a nurse. (to another student)
G130 Yours? Yes, you? Yes, have you got any
G131 ambitions? (Ss laugh) Nothing? (to another
G132 student) You?
G133 S2 : A teacher.
G134 Ms. Lee: To be a teacher. OK? Ambitions, repeat,
G135 ambitions.
G136 Ss : Ambitions.

Discourse data - Experiment Group 4

H64 Ms. Lee: OK, another one. (writes on board)
H65 Ambitions.
H66 Ss : Ambitions.
H67 Ms. Lee: Ambitions.
H68 Ss : Ambitions.
H69 Ms. Lee: You know what ambitions are? Em ambitions
H70 are things you want to be or things you want
H71 to do. OK? Ambitions.
H72 Ss : Ambitions.
H73 Ms. Lee: Ambitions.
H74 Ss : Ambitions.

The fact that involving learners in processing word meaning is a better explanation strategy is also supported by Nation (1990) and Nattinger (1988). Nation (ibid:63-64) states that "(I)n order for learning to last, the learner must make an effort. The best way to make sure a learner forgets a word is for the teacher to present a short, clear explanation of the meaning and then pass on to the next piece of work.' It is only through active learner involvement that deep learning can be effected. Deep motivated learners, according to Biggs and Moore (1993:312), relate 'the content to personally meaningful contexts or to existing prior knowledge.'

A rich variety of explanation strategies that involve learners in mental processing has been noted when four EFL lessons were video-taped during which the range of vocabulary strategies were identified. These include: instructing students to repeat the new vocabulary item by helping them associate the sound with the form of the word, involving students in associating meaning with the word by saying the word and performing paralinguistic gestures at the same time to help them better remember the words, asking students to explain a word by means of demonstrations and examples, soliciting an L1 explanation of the word from students, conducting immediate tests which re-stimulate students to process the words learnt and lastly, repetition of the words learnt through subsequent tasks that engage students in further rethinking or reprocessing of the words.

The Repetition of Vocabulary Items

On examining subjects' answers in post-test 1 in which subjects were asked to put down the meanings of the vocabulary items in either English or Chinese, it was found that there are a number of instances where they put down the teacher's explanation against the wrong item. And out of the 10 target vocabulary items, those which have the fewest instances of the subjects misidentifying the meaning of the word are 'qualifications', 'initiative', 'vacancy', 'hunt', and 'confident'. Evidence suggests that at least three of these five items had been previously encountered by the subjects prior to the experiment.

Firstly, it has been stated above that the subjects admitted having heard of the Chinese transliteration of 'qualifications' in the post-experiment interview session. Secondly, the pre-test result of 'hunt' demonstrates that this is another familiar item. Finally, successful L1 translation solicitations for 'confident' in the experiment proves that this is also a familiar vocabulary item (the low incidence of mismatching for 'initiative' will be discussed below). It cannot be sheer co-incidence that a lower incidence of misidentification occurs among more familiar items.

For a learner to successfully acquire a vocabulary item, the same item should be repeated in the same lesson and in subsequent lessons as discussed in the sub-section on the level of learner involvement. Channell (1980) maintains that an important part of vocabulary acquisition course is its exercise so that the words will be repeated not only in the lesson they are taught but also in subsequent lessons.

A less familiar item can at most form a learner's passive vocabulary and only very familiar items become a learner's active vocabulary that can be encoded in the productive skills of writing and speaking.

Elaboration of Vocabulary Explanations

Despite the fact that clear and short explanations can easily be forgotten and multi-type explanations are usually richer, over-elaborate explanations may merely serve to confuse and distract. Thus with 'initiative', probably the most difficult item on the list, the mono-type groups may find a short paraphrase inadequate to deduce word meaning while the over-elaborate explanations that take up 28 and 27 transcribed lines of teacher talk in groups 1 and 3 respectively might have caused ambiguity and confusion and hence have defocused students' attention on the meaning of the word.

Discourse data - Experiment group 1

E321 Ss : Initiative.
E322 Ms. Lee: Initiative.
E323 Ss : Initiative.
E324 Ms. Lee: Initiative.
E325 Ss : Initiative.
E326 Ms. Lee: Now, initiative comes from the word initiate.
E327 To initiate means to start something. If you
E328 start something, then you initiate something.
E329 So if you show initiative in something, that
E330 means you don't have to wait for people to
E331 tell you what to do. You can start doing
E332 something on your own. That is to show er
E333 initiative in your work, OK? Now, for
E334 example, if you if you are a good student
E335 you should show initiative in learning. How
E336 do you show initiative in lear-learning? You
E337 don't have to wait for the teacher to tell you
E338 what to do and what to read. You can do
E339 things on your own, OK? You know when
E340 you should finish your homework, when you
E341 start your revision, you know when to go to
E342 the library and borrow books and learn more
E343 about a subject, alright? To show initiative,
E344 alright? You can do things on your own. You
E345 can start working on your own without waiting,
E346 without having to wait to be told what to do.
E347 OK, now let us look at the last paragraph.

As both the mono-type groups and multi-type groups had difficulty grasping the meaning of 'initiative', they probably singled this out as the most difficult item, thereby explaining the low incidence of misidentification with this item. Chaudron (1982:170) states that 'a major problem for the student may lie in the teacher's elaboration of vocabulary meanings through increased redundancy; the non-native listener may find it difficult to decode the exact message, because he cannot discern whether the same information has been provided redundantly or whether new information has been supplied.' The extent of elaboration in multi-type vocabulary explanations cannot be overlooked.

The Level of Abstraction of Vocabulary Items

Nation (1990) suggests that the learning burden of a word can be affected by the part of speech of a word. According to him, nouns and adjectives are easier to learn than verbs and adverbs. Yet the overall performance of the four groups illustrated in Table 1 shows that the most difficult item is 'initiative'. Although 'initiative' is a noun, the subjects did not find it any easier than 'thoroughly', an adverb.

One added feature that determines whether a word is difficult or not is its level of abstraction. The more abstract is the item, the more ambiguous is the meaning and thus more demanding is the task of meaning abstraction. As abstract concepts cannot be acquired from our senses, these are naturally more difficult to learners. Hence, whether to employ multi-type or mono-type explanations appropriately depends closely on how concrete or abstract an item is.

The Presence or Absence of L1 Equivalents

Another feature that explains whether a vocabulary item is easy or difficult to learners is whether there is an L1 equivalent for the item. Since L1 association greatly reduces the learning load and helps learners develop new concepts from known ones, an item with an L1 equivalent is undeniably easier for learners than those without. This being so, 'initiative' is a difficult item not only because it is a highly abstract item, but also because no L1 equivalent exists for the word.

Conclusion

The two factors examined in this study were whether the use of a text better assists vocabulary explanations in the classroom and whether multi-type or mono-type explanations better help learners abstract word meaning. The experimental results support the use of a text in vocabulary explanations but do not indicate whether multi-type or mono-type explanations work better at offering clear and lucid explanations of word meaning.

Multi-type or mono-type explanations cannot be assessed independently from a variety of other factors that affect learning: the level of learner involvement, the repetition of vocabulary items, the elaboration of vocabulary explanations, the level of abstraction of vocabulary items and the presence or absence of L1 equivalents. Indeed, as with classroom teaching in general, explanations cannot and should not be made without careful consideration of learners as an active participant, the inherent difficulty of the vocabulary to be taught and the quality of teacher input.

Direct interaction with learners in the classroom provides valuable on-the-spot feedback to teachers who can then make instantaneous decisions on whether an explanation is comprehended or whether further elaborations, repairs or repetitions are necessary. It is such dynamics of classroom interaction that make classroom research a frutiful and intriguing area of investigation.

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